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Ordinary people in Japan are starting to wonder whether to trust what politicians and the media tell them

Members of the Japanese government panel to investigate the accident at Fukushima nuclear power plant inspect the damaged building housing the No.3 reactor. Photograph: Kyodo/Reuters

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Several weeks after the Japanese tsunami, I asked an acquaintance in the country whether the electricity shortfall resulting from the Fukushima crisis would affect his lifestyle choices. "Not at all," he said breezily. "Osaka's on a totally different grid from eastern Japan. Even if we saved electricity, we couldn't send the surplus to Tokyo. So it's not really my problem."

Despite a hint of underlying Osaka-Tokyo tension in his words - the west-east division in Japan is as marked as the north-south one in England - there was some truth in what he said.

Emotionally, all Japanese people were horrified by the earthquake, tsunami and subsequent nuclear meltdown. But in practical terms - the damage, the clean up, the radioactive fallout, the electricity shortages - this was a particularly eastern Japanese crisis.

Nearly five months on, however, the nuclear crisis has also become western Japan's "problem". Understanding the reactions of people living beyond the immediate vicinity of Fukushima highlights the ongoing political fallout of the disaster.

At a rural supermarket, for example, a pregnant woman points to a hastily erected sign and asks the assistant, "You're absolutely sure that this beef doesn't come from Fukushima?" Her concern follows news reports in mid-July that radioactive caesium exceeding legal limits had been discovered in beef products transported from Fukushima to many parts of the country. For customers like her, hundreds of miles from Tohoku, radioactive contamination was no longer an abstract danger appearing on the evening news; it was now before them on the dinner table.

The beef irradiation scare occurred even after politicians and media commentators had explicitly reassured the Japanese public that the government was monitoring food safety. There has been much discussion since March of the ways that Fukushima exposed the "safety myth" of the Japanese nuclear power industry. But the wider "authority myth" is now crumbling, with ordinary people not knowing whether to trust the word of anyone in authority.

This trust deficit has been exacerbated by revelations not only from Fukushima, but also in recent weeks from Japan's westernmost nuclear plant in Genkai, Saga prefecture.

Like many other plants, Genkai has had two reactors in temporary shutdown while regular inspections are undertaken (only 19 of Japan's 54 reactors are currently in operation). As local residents debated whether to support the restarting of Genkai's reactors, news emerged that Kyushu Electric Power Company had instructed its employees to try and influence feedback to a televised Q&A session on the Genkai problem in late June, so as to create the impression of widespread public support for the "restart" campaign. Last week, the Saga prefectural governor admitted meeting Kyushu Electric officials several days before the broadcast and mentioning his own concern for "pro-restart" voices to be heard.

The Genkai story line is depressingly familiar, involving covert attempts to manipulate public opinion and the perceived collusion of senior politicians and nuclear officials. The institutional behaviours that enabled the nuclear power industry to gain such political influence in the decades preceding Fukushima appear not to have changed, once more undermining trust in politicians and nuclear bureaucrats.

Meanwhile, on 13 July, Naoto Kan, the prime minister, announced his vision for a "society that can work without nuclear plants" - a boost for anti-nuclear campaigners, it might seem. In fact, the message has been undermined by the lame-duck authority of the messenger, whose resignation is apparently pending and whose leadership is widely castigated.

In all this uncertainty over future policy direction, the governor of Yamaguchi prefecture, also in the west of Japan, has temporarily rescinded planning permission for Japan's newest nuclear plant in Kaminoseki. Kaminoseki has already splashed out on the generous government subsidies granted to nuclear-host communities, as illustrated by a plush new hot spring resort

being built in the town centre. Such subsidies will end if construction of the Kaminoseki plant is mothballed or cancelled, plunging the town into a financial crisis.

But as townspeople grumbled during their annual summer festival two weeks ago - a festival also funded by the central government - how will Kaminoseki survive without the subsidies? It's the same question that residents in Fukushima and Genkai asked themselves more than 40 years ago. Their solution then - build new nuclear power plants - inadvertently led to a crisis that is now very much everyone's problem.

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